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Weber, Ralph

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Why Talk about Chinese Metaphysics?

Ralph Weber, URPP Asia and Europe, University of Zurich

***Abstract:** Chinese philosophy in the twentieth century has often been related to some sort of cultural or other particularism or some sort of philosophical universalism. By and large, these still seem to be the terms along which academic debates are carried out. The tension is particularly manifest in notions such as ‘Chinese philosophy’, ‘Daoist cosmology’, ‘Neo-Confucian idealism’, or ‘Chinese metaphysics’. For some, ‘Chinese metaphysics’ may be a blatant contradictio in adiecto, while others may find it a most ordinary topic to be discussed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this article, I set out to examine two major discourses in which talk about ‘metaphysics’ is frequent and popular and to which talk of ‘Chinese metaphysics’ may wish to contribute: the history of philosophy and analytic philosophy. My contention is that it is usually far from obvious what reasons are behind putting ‘Chinese metaphysics’ on the academic agenda and to what precise purpose this is done. What my discussion seeks to highlight is the as yet often largely unarticulated dimension of the politics of comparative philosophy – of which talk about ‘Chinese metaphysics’ may but need not be an example.*

Why should one ask the question “Why talk about Chinese metaphysics”? The question is relevant for at least two reasons. First, there seems to be a gap between the suspicion which talk of metaphysics has met across most and very different quarters in professional philosophy in the twentieth century and the light-heartedness with which the term has been used during the same period of time and up to the present day by those researching or doing ‘Chinese philosophy’. Secondly, the use of the adjective ‘Chinese’ in the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ seems awkward if we consider what many take ‘metaphysics’ very roughly to mean, namely something like a concern with explaining the fundamental nature of being and the world. It would seem that the object of the concern, i.e. the fundamental nature of being and the world, should be the same for Chinese as well as for non-Chinese. Obviously, rather than having something to do with the object of the concern, the adjective might indicate a specifically ‘Chinese’ approach, a ‘Chinese’ conceptual map, a ‘Chinese’ sense, or many other things, but my concern is that these uses of the adjective ‘Chinese’ potentially in many cases and clearly in some cases include a political side that foregrounds goals and purposes far beyond the precincts of the philosophy department.

Let me elaborate on these two reasons in some more detail. As is widely known, the term ‘metaphysics’ has had a rather troubled history. For one thing, the meaning of the term’s first occurrence as μετὰ τὰ φυσικά (*meta ta physica*) in the title for some of Aristotle’s treatises is still contested, that is, it is unclear whether its use was bibliographical or a substantive, perhaps noetic, reference to the contents of the treatises.¹ For another thing, and perhaps more troubling, the

¹ Since the 1950s, scholars have challenged the longstanding view which attributed the term ‘metaphysics’ to the librarian Andronicus of Rhodes arguing that Aristotle himself or a not too distant follower of his, the Peripatetic Ariston of Ceos, named these treatises on ‘first philosophy’ (*prote philosophia* πρώτη φιλοσοφία) *meta ta physika*.

history of the term ‘metaphysics’ has been one of a series of farewells, bid by those who wished to leave behind some sort of metaphysics and to install, explicitly or implicitly, some new metaphysics. David Hume, for instance, thoroughly criticized metaphysics, yet insisted on cultivating what he called “true metaphysics.”² Immanuel Kant bade farewell to speculative metaphysics but himself continued to use the term ‘metaphysics’, highlighted the importance of metaphysics as science, and arguably produced no less than a metaphysics (albeit of another sort).³ Nietzsche perhaps was among the first to sound the death knell for the term, and this has indeed become the general theme for much of twentieth century philosophy where the *end of metaphysics* has been announced by many, pragmatists, logical positivists and deconstructionists alike. For Charles Sanders Peirce, “ontological metaphysics” was either “meaningless gibberish” or “downright absurd.”⁴ Rudolf Carnap found metaphysics to be of a “deceptive character” only capable of providing “the illusion of knowledge.”⁵ Jacques Derrida, finally, dismantled what he took to be a *metaphysics of presence*, visible in the entire ‘Western’ metaphysical tradition and in his view no more than a futile attempt to fix the meaning of conceptual oppositions thereby freezing the play of linguistic differences.

Interestingly and somewhat perplexingly, the term seems to have fallen out of favor in Europe and America just as it made its first appearances as *xing’ershangxue* 形而上學 in China (reintroduced into modern Chinese by way of the Japanese using a classical Chinese-character compound of the *Yijing* 易經 to translate the modern ‘European’ word⁶) and there among some of the leading intellectuals of the day gained a popularity which still seems to fuel contemporary debates. Hence, while talk about metaphysics in Europe is viewed with utmost suspicion in many (although not all) quarters of contemporary philosophy or is largely used metaphorically only (e.g. as an equivalent of *Weltanschauung*), the situation seems to be quite different in China and with those who do ‘Chinese philosophy’ elsewhere. Not only is the term 形而上學 frequently and we should assume meaningfully used, but it is further used in the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ (中

According to these scholars, the sequence is deliberately chosen to make a didactic point, for noetically, the subject matter of the works on physics is prior to that on metaphysics. Hence, this view sees a link between the title, *Metaphysics*, and the content treated in the books. See: Moraux, 1951, 314–315; Chroust, 1961, 601–616; Reiner, 1969, 139–174.

² “[We] must cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate.” See: Hume, 1978, 1.

³ “That the human mind would someday entirely give up metaphysical investigations is just as little to be expected, as that we would someday gladly stop all breathing so as never to take in impure air. There will therefore be metaphysics in the world at every time, and what is more, in every human being, and especially the reflective ones: metaphysics that each, in the absence of a public standard of measure, will carve out for themselves in their own manner.” See: Kant, 2004, 118.

⁴ Peirce, 1905, 423.

⁵ Carnap, 1935, sec. 5.

⁶ Liu, 1995, 325.

國形而上學). The qualifying adjective ‘Chinese’ is interesting.⁷ Whatever else ‘metaphysics’ is taken to mean, the qualification reveals a particularistic understanding, although what particularity precisely is invoked by the term ‘Chinese’ is unclear.

If it makes sense to talk about ‘Chinese’ metaphysics, however, then there are at least two presuppositions on a conceptual level that go with it: (1) the adjective introduces a dividing line emphasizing that ‘Chinese’ metaphysics is different from non-Chinese metaphysics (Western, Greek, Christian, European, American, Cartesian, Kantian, Indian, perhaps Buddhist, etc.); (2) yet calling both ‘metaphysics’, the dividing line also *relates* what is differentiated as ‘Chinese’ and ‘non-Chinese’. There can be no difference without at least one *commonality* in the respect of which the differentiated is what it purports to be, namely *different*. The first presupposition is that which most scholars who use the expression wish to emphasize, i.e. the distinctiveness of ‘Chinese metaphysics’. But the second presupposition, i.e. the commonality shared with other metaphysics, is almost systematically ignored. Zhao Dunhua 赵敦华 has pointed out this problematique in a recent article:

The defender of a uniquely Chinese metaphysics ... seems to me to appeal to the relativist thesis of incommensurability. If there were nothing in common at all between Chinese and Western metaphysics, one would not be able to speak of metaphysics with reference to the Chinese term 形而上学, which can be unmistakably identified with the Western term “metaphysics”.⁸

The situation gets further complicated in a multilingual setting where ‘Chinese metaphysics’ can either refer to something ‘Chinese’, for which metaphysics functions as a term of translation, or to something allegedly ‘non-Chinese’, with which metaphysics (as a term to be translated) is associated and for which a Chinese language equivalent is sought. The present article aims to clarify the meaning of the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ and the scholarly interest that may motivate talk about it.

A short preliminary note on my methodological approach seems in order. In this article, I pursue a systematic approach since I am interested in registering different uses of ‘metaphysics’ as if they were all uses of some same concept (which is partly why we refer to them in each case as ‘metaphysics’). This also means that I do not consider any of them to be simply a homonym. A systematic approach implies that one de-contextualizes to some degree and my discussion indeed is

⁷ It should be noted that it is not always the case that the adjective in an adjective-noun expression is the qualifying part. Sometimes the whole expression stands for the particularism, such as when say ‘Western metaphysics’ is juxtaposed to ‘Chinese spirituality’. Each of the expressions in this case may but need not be pleonastic, for one could well imagine someone holding that there is ‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ metaphysics, but no ‘Chinese metaphysics’. It seems to be however clear that this is not how ‘Chinese metaphysics’ as an expression is used.

⁸ Zhao Dunhua, “Metaphysics in China and in the West: Common Origin and Later Divergence”, in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 2006 (1): 23.

highly schematic. Only some uses of ‘metaphysics’ are discussed and briefly contrasted with actual or possible uses of the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ to see whether any of them may explain the use of the term ‘metaphysics’ in the latter. Yet, I also address issues relevant to comparative approaches since my final goal of analysis is to explore uses of ‘Chinese metaphysics’ with an emphasis on the use of the term ‘Chinese’ in the expression along the lines outlined above.

To be as clear as I can I should emphasize that by no means do I mean to claim that the use of ‘metaphysics’ in the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ necessarily must match up with one of the registered uses (although I would uphold that it should be relatable in *some* way to *some* uses of the term). At the end, the question might be as much illuminated by ruling out some uses as it would be by claiming to have found the one use. Moreover, it would of course be very wrong-headed to assume in the first place that there is just one use of the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’. Strictly speaking, there probably are as many as the number of those who use it (and perhaps even more). The aim of this article is not at all to account for all these actual uses, which would be impossible, nor to give a fair picture of the variety of its uses, which would perhaps be possible yet still seems overly ambitious and unnecessary for the present purposes, but merely to hint at one or two uses which seem to be common enough to mark out a dominant position in the discourse.

In contemporary philosophy, there are two discourses, namely the history of philosophy and analytic philosophy, in which there clearly is much talk of metaphysics (i.e. the term appears as a topic in scholarly work, in titles of conferences, etc.). In what follows, I shall examine each briefly to see whether it may throw light on the use of the term ‘metaphysics’ in the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’.⁹ I take that expression to be used mainly by those who have an interest in ‘Chinese philosophy’, which is also to say that a discussion of the uses of the term ‘metaphysics’ in the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ might well also inform debates over ‘Chinese philosophy’ (of course again a much debated expression). I take these discourses to be obvious choices, knowing that they need not be equally obvious in the eyes of others. None of them should be understood as forming a unitary discourse in the sense that there is consensus about the meaning of ‘metaphysics’. The term, ‘metaphysics’, might even be at the very centre of contestation. Here the reader is referred to the more specialized literature, which offers all differentiations one might miss in my discussion, yet which is, I submit, not of any larger importance for the argument presented in this

⁹ I do not deny that there are many other contemporary discourses in which the term ‘metaphysics’ is used, but would argue that in most of these the term is either used metaphorically (see for instance French’s *Cowboy Metaphysics*, French 1997) or used to speak about that which the author in question thinks one should no longer speak about. Surely, there are also innovative attempts by contemporary philosophers who argue against the ‘end-of-metaphysics-thesis’, but they are usually motivated by the belief that the thesis has become a commonplace in the discourse to which they wish to contribute. Hence, talk about metaphysics is not dominant in that specific discourse. See for instance the PhD thesis by Julia Sushytska on “Originary Metaphysics: Why Philosophy has not Reached its End”: Sushytska, 2008.

article. I will then examine the claim that there is a specifically ‘Chinese’ metaphysics, for what precisely is meant by the qualifying adjective ‘Chinese’ may differ and may be unclear. My final contention will be that it is usually far from obvious what reasons are behind putting ‘Chinese metaphysics’ on the academic agenda and I shall examine the extent to which these reasons might be claimed to be primarily political. My discussion hence seeks to highlight the dimension of a politics of comparative philosophy.

1. Talk of Metaphysics in the History of Philosophy

A first and rather obvious discourse in which the term ‘metaphysics’ is frequently used is that of the history of philosophy. We readily speak of Aristotelian, Thomistic or Cartesian metaphysics or the metaphysics of, say, Plotin, Leibniz or Kant. However, from a methodological point of view, that readiness and the appropriateness of using the term ‘metaphysics’ might be questioned in each of these instances. Were Aristotle, Plotin, Leibniz and Kant really speaking about the same thing, the same ‘metaphysics’? Perhaps so, but a persuasive answer to the question seems nonetheless important for anyone who decides to base his or her historiographical scholarship on that assertion.

There are also authors and texts where we might not feel equally comfortable to speak of ‘metaphysics’ in the first place, or would feel compelled to offer additional argument. For one thing, there is the case of applying the term to the writing of those who clearly wrote before the term was coined such as Plato and Aristotle, or the authors of the pre-Socratic writings or even the Homeric epics. If one takes Aristotle’s book later given the title *Metaphysics* as measure for what qualifies as metaphysics, then to what extent, for instance, is talk of ‘Plato’s metaphysics’ appropriate, given that Aristotle offers an account of reality precisely in contradistinction to Plato’s assertion that what is real are the ideals and that physical objects and physical events only exist insofar as they instantiate these ideals? It takes not much to see that again difference comes with commonality and that the above characterization of ‘contradistinction’ opens the ground on which an argument might be produced that there is ‘metaphysics’ in Plato (at least both seem to be concerned about what is real, and if that is what one takes ‘metaphysics’ to be about, then very clearly both Plato and Aristotle did ‘metaphysics’).

Qualifying as ‘metaphysical’ the work of those authors who were not only familiar with the term ‘metaphysics’, but perhaps last of all would have qualified their own work as dealing with ‘metaphysics’ is another obvious case asking for additional argument. Nietzsche, Heidegger or Wittgenstein perhaps come to mind. Each of them in some sense wrote in contradistinction to what they perceived to be metaphysics. This is different from Plato who could not possibly have

subscribed to the explicit thought that he is doing ‘metaphysics’ or doing something in contradistinction to it. The mentioned philosophers all were aware of previous uses of the term ‘metaphysics’, but wished to overcome it, to do something else, to establish a counter-discourse. The commonality which allows subsuming their differences as a difference in some common respect is the simple negative reference to an *end of metaphysics*. In positive terms, the commonality in these cases perhaps is not to be searched in a superordinate concept of metaphysics, but e.g. in notions such as that of ‘a new beginning of philosophy’, where one kind of philosophy involves metaphysics and another, the allegedly new kind of philosophy, does not. Obviously, many of those who have claimed to present a philosophy without a metaphysics have later been reproached of having simply ignored their own underlying metaphysical assumptions. Hence, about each of the mentioned philosophers there is scholarly work which purports to examine their ‘metaphysics’ in a historical perspective.

Three points seem to me particularly important in debates over whether a text is to be read as a ‘metaphysical’ text in the history of philosophy. The first point concerns the distinction between an *exclusive* and an *inclusive* understanding of the term. Does one approach the text with a fixed definition of what counts as metaphysics and what does not, or does one allow for the possibility of being surprised by the text so as to broaden one’s view of what counts as metaphysics? If I take Aristotle as measure of what metaphysics is and exclusively define it as an interest in the being of material objects and events in the exact manner displayed in Aristotle, then Plato – and, strictly speaking, probably everyone else – fails to be a metaphysician. If, however, I am open to the possibility of broadening the definition gleaned from Aristotle, I might come to see metaphysics, say, as an interest in reality regardless of how that reality is conceived, and then Aristotle as well as Plato may be considered as authors dealing with metaphysics. In my view, there is no philosophical criterion conclusively to tell whether an exclusive or an inclusive understanding of the term commends itself (other than perhaps the ineffectiveness of the extremes, i.e. conceptual narrowness or conceptual overstretch).

Complicating the issue is a second point. The absence or presence of the term ‘metaphysics’ (or of some key terms associated with it) in the texts to be read for their metaphysics might give rise to a distinction between the understanding of the term *as it presents itself* in the text versus the understanding of the term *as it is imposed* upon a text. Although I find the distinction to be indicating a difference in degree rather than in kind (because both a grasp of the term as it presents ‘itself’ as well as a total imposition, which would deny any importance whatsoever to the text upon which the term is imposed, seems hermeneutically impossible or undesirable respectively), it makes a whole lot of a difference what a historian of philosophy claims to do. Yet, again, I do not see a

compelling reason how one approach trumps the other, as both are simply claims that can be given good or bad arguments.

The third point also has to do with claims. Does a historian of philosophy claim that his or her use of the term ‘metaphysics’ with a view to several texts implies a *substantive* account of metaphysics, i.e. an account prompted by the contents of these texts themselves, or that the term is merely used for *heuristic* purposes, i.e. to make possible an ordered account and presentation of the contents? Nowadays, claims of employing a term only heuristically are popular precisely because it takes away from the pressure to offer substantive arguments. Yet, any heuristic account will to some degree have to involve a substantive account and to that degree an argument is required. Whatever approach is taken in the history of philosophy to the question of whether or not a use of the term ‘metaphysics’ is apposite, it requires additional argument. Contrary to the many debates about whether a term may or may not be used in such and such context, I would hold that it is never the use of a term itself that is at issue but rather the arguments that go with it, arguments behind which sometimes lurk the interests of those who use the term, as they do with those who argue against its use.

Were we now to consider the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ as well as some related expressions such as ‘Confucian metaphysics’ or ‘Buddhist metaphysics’ and debates over the appositeness of the term ‘metaphysics’ in them with regard to the history of philosophy, then we would see that much the same or at least similar points are being discussed. Can we use the term ‘metaphysics’ for texts whose authors not possibly could have been acquainted with it? Do the *Lunyu* 論語 or the *Daodejing* 道德經 hence display a metaphysics? If an exclusively Aristotelian understanding of the term is applied they probably do not, but things may be different with an inclusive understanding. What about using the term heuristically, i.e. with an indicated interest to arrange usefully one’s material, say, with a very inclusive definition of metaphysics and a clear and argued statement that one is imposing the term? Is there a point in the history of Chinese philosophy from which onward there clearly is talk about metaphysics such as after Buddhism entered China or, as Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 (1893–1964) has argued, with the coming about of Xuanxue 玄學, which in his view was about “ontology” and stood in contrast to the earlier Han philosophers’ occupation with “cosmology” and “cosmogony”?¹⁰ Or why not let ‘metaphysics’ begin with that passage in the *Yijing* on 形而上 (which the Japanese originators probably chose for a reason)? One could then use that understanding of the term ‘metaphysics’ as 形而上 again either inclusively or exclusively, which in the latter case could lead one to doubt seriously whether Aristotle indeed had

¹⁰ See: Wagner, 2003, 83.

a metaphysics. That, in my view, would be a legitimate doubt which all has to do with the inclusivity and exclusivity of the applied understanding and nothing with the question whether something is Chinese or not.

The point is that any claim of a beginning of ‘metaphysical’ talk in Chinese philosophy depends on the arguments for one’s understanding of the term ‘metaphysics’ (or of ‘ontology’ in Tang’s case). Let us consider Tang Yongtong’s argument in a little more detail by quoting some crucial passages. He writes:

[The philosophy of the Dark of the Wei and Jin] had gone beyond the narrow attachment to the external functions 外用 of cosmic movements and had proceeded to discuss the substance 本體 of Heaven, Earth, and the ten thousand kinds of entities. The Han dynasty reckoned Heaven and Dao as part of physical nature; the Wei and Jin dismissed Heaven and the Dao and explored the substance 本體; for them the singular controlled the many and brought them back to the dark ultimate...

They discarded physical phenomena, transcended time and space, and studied the true limit, *zhenji* 真際, of Heaven, Earth, and the ten thousand kinds of entities.¹¹

To say the least, these characterizations of ontology do not strike me as obviously fitting the Aristotelian emphasis on physical phenomena, but one might probably produce arguments for an understanding of ontology which would capture Wang Bi’s as well as, say, Plato’s writings.

Note also that Tang Yongtong’s definition seems to rely on a distinction between ontology and cosmology. The latter of which in its composite form of *kosmos* (κόσμος) and *logos* (λόγος) is a relative late term and was popularised by Christian Wolff, who in 1730 published a book entitled *Cosmologia generalis*. In that book, Wolff established cosmology alongside ontology, psychology and natural theology as subdivisions of metaphysics. If one assumes this point of view and follows Tang in that there was cosmology in Han China, then there clearly was talk about metaphysics, and even so in the pre-Qin period. A classic example is the *Zhongyong* 中庸, which according to Ezra Pound “contains what is usually supposed not to exist, namely the Confucian metaphysics.”¹² And if you think Pound to be at best a second-rate authority on the *Zhongyong*, then mind that Tu Weiming 杜維明 refers to this note of Pound as “fascinating”, and has used the term ‘metaphysics’ himself in that context, when referring to *cheng* 誠 (what he translates as sincerity, reality, truth) as a “metaphysical concept”, as well as in the more general context of other pre-Qin Confucian philosophy.¹³

In my view, the use of the term ‘metaphysics’ – when talking about the history of philosophy – does not pose any serious philosophical problem, regardless of whether it is European,

¹¹ Quoted from: Wagner, 2003, 85. For the Chinese original, see: Tang (2001), 43–44.

¹² Pound, 1969, 95.

¹³ Tu, 1989, 17 and 132 fn. 28.

Chinese or any other philosophy that is concerned. For it is not the use of the term itself that is or can be problematic, but the arguments (or their absence) that provide the reasoning for the use. Hence, if by ‘Chinese metaphysics’ is meant ‘metaphysics in the history of Chinese philosophy’, then talk about it seems to me entirely apposite to the extent that the question why one should talk about it poses itself in no different a manner than it poses itself in the history of ‘European’ or any other philosophy. The reasons why one should or should not talk about ‘metaphysics’ in all of these cases hinges on the arguments underlying one’s understanding of the term, one’s claims attached to the use and one’s purposes for using it rather than on whether or not the text itself is characterized as ‘Chinese’ or not. It is not because a text is ‘Chinese’ that the term ‘metaphysics’ should or should not be used in historiography.

2. Talk of Metaphysics in Analytic Philosophy

A second discourse in which the term ‘metaphysics’ is frequently used is analytic philosophy. Although analytic philosophers have initially been at the forefront of the critique of metaphysics, the eventual demise of logical positivism and its verificationist criterion of meaningfulness around the mid-20th century has given rise to new talk about ‘metaphysics’, albeit in very specific senses of the term. In a historical survey of analytic philosophy, Hans-Johann Glock distinguishes what he calls “three distinct metaphysical seeds”.¹⁴

The first seed was planted by Willard Van Orman Quine, who developed a naturalistic approach to ontology implying a “blurring of the boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science.”¹⁵ It was however not traditional metaphysics that Quine tried to revitalize, denying, as Glock put it, “that *a priori* philosophical reflection can establish what kinds of things there are.”¹⁶ He still sought to establish what kinds of things there are, but not in a sort of rationalism but by helping science to explicate its underlying metaphysics.¹⁷ Glock sums up Quine’s approach as follows:

[Quine’s naturalism] helps science in drawing up an inventory of the world. It translates our scientific theories into an ideal formal language (‘canonical notation’) and thereby clarifies and, where possible, reduces their ‘ontological commitments’, the types of entities the existence of which these theories presuppose.¹⁸

Glock illustrates the reduction of ontological commitment by way of translation into a canonical

¹⁴ Glock, 2008, 48.

¹⁵ Quine, 1953, 20.

¹⁶ Glock, 2008, 48.

¹⁷ This statement should be qualified to forestall misunderstanding as Quine makes it abundantly clear that he looks to “variables and quantification for evidence as to what a theory says that there is, not for evidence as to what there is.” See: Quine, 1960, 243, fn.5

¹⁸ Glock, 2008, 48.

notation with the example of ‘The rose is red’, which containing “a name for a property ... seems to commit us to the existence of an intensional entity”, and $\forall x (x \text{ is red} \rightarrow x \text{ is a color})$, which does not. Instead of analyzing the ontological commitments that science relies on, Quine seeks to replace them by less problematic analogues, thereby revealing its underlying metaphysics. Quine’s approach has been extraordinarily influential with contemporary naturalists, in Glock’s words amounting to the claim that by “exploring the things our best current scientific theories *take* to exist, they also purport to provide the best account of what things *actually* exist.”¹⁹

Much in contrast to Quine’s rapprochement with science stands Peter Strawson’s ‘descriptive metaphysics’ which offers the second seed for a revival of metaphysics. Strawson is very appreciative of ‘ordinary language philosophy’, which “up to a point” is “the best, and indeed the only sure, way in philosophy,” but he has come to believe that it unduly shuns the need for metaphysics, for “when we ask how we use this or that expression, our answers, however revealing at a certain level, are apt to assume, and not to expose those general elements of structure which the metaphysician wants revealed.”²⁰ These general elements are what descriptive metaphysics is after, i.e. the description of “the actual structure of our thought about the world”, and it does so by focusing on such seemingly ordinary matters of everyday discourse as referring to a particular item and predicating something about it. Descriptive metaphysics is different from revisionary metaphysics which seeks “to produce a better structure”.²¹ Strawson explicates in more detail what he means by that actual metaphysical structure that is to be described:

For there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history – or none recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialities of the most refined thinking. They are the commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and are yet the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. It is with these, their interconnexions, and the structure that they form, that a descriptive metaphysics will be primarily concerned.²²

We think of the world as containing particular things some of which are independent of ourselves; we think of the world’s history as made up of particular episodes in which we may or may not have a part; and we think of these particular things and events as included in the topics of our common discourse, as things about which we can talk to each other. These are remarks about the way we think of the world, about our conceptual scheme. A more recognizably philosophical, though no clearer, way of expressing them would be to say that our ontology comprises objective particulars. It may comprise much else besides.²³

Hence, what Strawson has in mind are objective particulars, foremost material bodies and persons, the existence of which is presupposed in the actual structure of our thought. Material bodies and persons are fundamental categories in that structure and it is the task of descriptive metaphysics,

¹⁹ Glock, 2008, 49 (emphases in the original).

²⁰ Strawson, 1959, 9.

²¹ Strawson, 1959, 9.

²² Strawson, 1959, 10.

²³ Strawson, 1959, 15.

according to Strawson, to show how they “hang together and how they relate, in turn, to those formal notions (such as existence, identity, and unity) which range through all categories.”²⁴ To see that Strawson uses the term ‘metaphysics’ in a very specific sense it suffices to point out his acknowledgment that that for which he has tried to give a rational account in fact and in a sense rests on beliefs “stubbornly held” by many people and also by some philosophers. Metaphysics, in Strawson’s account, comes to mean “the finding of reasons, good, bad or indifferent, for what we believe on instinct.”²⁵ Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics with its emphasis on a ‘massive core of human thinking’ has rightly been called “something of a return to Kant, though without his idealism”.²⁶

Finally, according to Glock, a third seed has been planted by the rise of modal logic and of theories of ‘direct reference’ such as those offered by contemporary essentialism. This particularly applies to proper names and natural kind terms, which are ‘rigid designators’ (in all possible worlds they designate the same thing if they designate anything at all, namely the essence of that thing, e.g. H₂O). According to Saul Kripke, if and only if something is true in all possible worlds, it is necessarily so and necessity is a notion of “metaphysics”.²⁷ Truths about rigid designators are necessary but also *a posteriori*, i.e. subject to scientific or empirical discovery. Contemporary essentialism can hence claim to be in line with Quine’s naturalism in important ways, even if the latter held that philosophy should not concern itself with necessity and essences because that is the business of science. Glock explains:

But if some necessary truths – truths about the essence of things – are *a posteriori*, philosophy can be continuous with science precisely because it scrutinizes such essences. This presupposes, however, that sense can be made of modal notions like that of possible worlds.²⁸

It is important to note that all three ‘metaphysical seeds’ remain within the framework of the linguistic turn. That framework eventually was questioned by Grice and Searle, who turned linguistic philosophy into a sub branch of the philosophy of mind. Approaches of the Chomskian ilk have done further work toward reversing the linguistic turn, also turning against Grice, by arguing against the idea that meaning and language are rooted in communication.²⁹ This has made the philosophy of mind the most thriving part of analytic philosophy, perhaps currently exemplified by someone like Jerry Fodor, who has argued that the meaning of public languages and intentionality of thought can be explained by a ‘language of thought’ (LOT).³⁰ Thus, today, Quinean naturalism

²⁴ Strawson, 1967, 318.

²⁵ Strawson, 1959, 247.

²⁶ Hamlyn, 1995, 558.

²⁷ Kripke, 1980, 35.

²⁸ Glock, 2008, 50–51.

²⁹ See: Glock, 2008, 54.

³⁰ See for his most recent statement: Fodor, 2008.

and essentialism leads many to consider the philosophy of mind as a sub branch of psychology, biology and neuroscience with the only task left to philosophy being the naturalization of mental phenomena, “i.e. to show that they are fully explicable in the terms of physical science.”³¹

Given the revival of metaphysics in analytic philosophy, does the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ refer to literature seeking to contribute to that specific discourse? I would say that this is generally not the case. Those pursuing Chinese philosophy have seen their topic as differing radically from analytic philosophy, so it is likely that their talk about ‘Chinese metaphysics’ is not directed toward discourse in analytic philosophy and that they purposely remain at a distance from natural science discourse. But could it possibly contribute? From among the mentioned seeds, Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics might seem to offer some intriguing possibility, but I hasten to add that, to my mind, it really only seems so. When Strawson writes that “we think of the world as” such and such, he surely by “we” means all humans. But when he then continues the sentence by “the world as containing particular *things* some of which are *independent* of ourselves”, does he not then assume some view as common which really is common to some humans only. One major claim of distinction of much of ‘Chinese metaphysics’ precisely is that instead of things there really are only events and processes and that instead of independency (between subject and object) there really is a sort of continuity (*heyi* 合一). Hence, Strawson’s approach might be promising but, along this line of reasoning, he is mistaken in assuming that “our conceptual scheme” refers to all human thinking when it really just refers to a ‘European’ philosophical view. His approach might be promising inasmuch as ‘Chinese metaphysics’ expresses an alternative conceptual scheme, based on different beliefs guided by a different instinct, and that scheme might be described. I think that something along the lines of an ‘alternative-conceptual-scheme-thesis’ is frequently argued in comparative philosophy (although not drawing on Strawson at all), but I am not yet convinced by the arguments.

If one were to establish a ‘Chinese metaphysics’ on the basis of Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics and to spell out the way of ‘Chinese thinking’ about the world, one would by ‘Chinese’ either have to refer to conceptualizations on the basis of writings (considered to be ‘Chinese’), which is not what Strawson is about, or have to refer to the thinking of actual human beings, which is what he is about, but on that level there simply is no case to be made for a process and continuity kind of thought somehow held by those considered ‘Chinese’. Strawson’s claims are all built upon such activities as reference and predication, i.e. identifying and talking about material objects and persons. And there is in my view no doubt that ‘Chinese’ refer and predicate as much as anybody else does. If someone asks someone else to take a seat, the reference is to that person and to some

³¹ Glock, 2008, 55.

material object to sit on, e.g. a chair. Remember that Strawson is interested in the “commonplaces of the least refined thinking” and not in the “specialities of the most refined thinking.” Arguments about the ‘Chinese’ process view however are expressions of highly refined thinking. In ordinary dealings, it simply is not the case that the identification, reference and predication of ‘Chinese’ people is somehow not involving persons and material objects. ‘Chinese’ also sit on a chair and not on a process, as much as ‘Europeans’ sit on a chair and not on an Aristotelian essence-plus-accidents or a Kantian noumenon/phenomenon. The difference between ‘Chinese’ and ‘non-Chinese’ perhaps only comes in once one is interested in that sort of texts where very sophisticated minds have tried to answer what a chair precisely is, say, whether a thing or rather an event, and so on. But these are questions which according to many accounts no longer fall into the domain of metaphysics as they can be safely left to science. At least that seems to be Strawson’s view, and it seems to me that his descriptive metaphysics is unrelated to any distinction between ‘Chinese’ and ‘non-Chinese’.

There is also a more recent trend mainly among scholars in the United States to establish a dialogue between analytic and Chinese philosophy. Mou Bo 牟博 has been a driving force in this and his collections of essays on Chinese philosophy on the one hand and analytic philosophy, Davidson and Searle on the other hand do not merely bring together scholarly work that pursues contrastive approaches, but also some that seeks substantially to contribute to the discussions in analytic philosophy.³² Another example of this kind is Liu Xiusheng’s essay on Mengzian internalism, which by reading the *Mengzi* 孟子 for its metaphysics invokes and to some extent also probes contemporary metaphysical theories (John McDowell, David Wiggins).³³ Insofar as the *Mengzi* is a text which by many is referred to as a key text of Chinese philosophy, it seems that Liu may be considered as doing ‘Chinese’ metaphysics. Given the systematic interests of analytical philosophers however, one would assume that the qualifying adjective ‘Chinese’ should not be of much philosophical import as concerns the arguments Liu develops from his reading of the *Mengzi*.

3. Talk of Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy

There are surely many uses of the expression “Chinese metaphysics” in a historiographical perspective and with the qualifications that I have given above I find not much of a problem in such a use of the expression itself. But equally many, if not the majority of uses of the expression, are it seems not aptly captured by calling them historiographical. Those who talk about ‘Chinese

³² See: Mou, 2001; Mou, 2006; Mou, 2008.

³³ See: Liu, 2002.

metaphysics' would not wish to be taken for historians of philosophy. They would want that which they do to count as contemporary philosophy, as 'Chinese philosophy' that is. But in terms of contemporary philosophy we are still left with the problem of what is meant by the qualifying adjective 'Chinese' in the expression 'Chinese metaphysics' (and perhaps equally in the expression 'Chinese philosophy'). It is not the use of the expression that I have discussed in the context of analytic philosophy, which would tend to de-emphasize the adjective 'Chinese'. In most uses of the expression in contemporary academic discourse, there is indeed an utter emphasis on the adjective 'Chinese' and more often than not it is even the main contention.

A concrete example might be helpful. Robert Cummings Neville published an article in 2003 in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* on the topic 'Metaphysics in Contemporary Chinese Philosophy'. Neville's article is, so much I should immediately say, not at all blind towards the state of talk about metaphysics in philosophy departments around the world and in almost exemplary manner (although I think eventually unsuccessfully) engages with the arguments that have motivated the assertions of an end of metaphysics. Indeed, Neville starts off by writing:

... most prominent forms of philosophy today, both Chinese and Western, take metaphysics to be an unnecessary, outmoded, and distracting (if not perverse) enterprise. In the West this deprecation of metaphysics is a Kantian legacy maintained by both Continental and analytical philosophers, with a few notable exceptions. In East Asia it results from construing the Chinese philosophical tradition as primarily ethical and practical, not theoretical.³⁴

It might be interesting to note that in line with this assessment of the situation in East Asia, a conference has been held in Beijing last year on the topic of Chinese epistemology and Chinese metaphysics.³⁵ Anyhow, what is important is that Neville starts off by stating that there is a common depreciation of metaphysics in the West and in East Asia and by arguing that both are equally misguided in that depreciation. There is in Neville's view a "need for metaphysics" to address various current crises, for example, in matters of distributive justice or ecology. The challenge is, as Neville sees it, that those pursuing Chinese philosophy "need to articulate metaphysical systems as detailed and abstract as Whitehead's"; furthermore, what he calls the "Chinese metaphysics of the self", if it is "to enter into contemporary discussions of justice and agency", then, he asserts, it "needs a metaphysical expression that can relate it to psychology, neurophysiology and all the social sciences".³⁶ There are two points that I would like to make. The first is that it strikes me as odd that Neville does not only ask for Chinese philosophers to give up-to-date expressions of Chinese metaphysics, which I would agree with, but that he also seems to

³⁴ Neville, 2003, 313.

³⁵ See the proceedings of the 2010 Summer ICCCP and ACPA Beijing Conference: *Metaphysics and Epistemology in Chinese Philosophy – A Systematic and Comparative Approach*, Renmin University of China, 10–11 July 2010.

³⁶ Neville, 2003, 320.

be positive that such expressions would certainly turn out to be a contribution. In his comments on the Chinese and especially the Confucian conception of ritual (which he asserts is of a “fundamental metaphysical or ontological status”) he writes that this “needs a contemporary metaphysical expression if its importance is to be seen”.³⁷ But, if we know that it will have importance before it has received a contemporary metaphysical expression, then it seems there is no need for such an expression. If there is a need, then it cannot be simply presupposed that it will have importance. It might not. I think that Neville mistakes what is an assumption (and a questionable assumption for that matter) for a certainty. The second point is that he effectually draws up a counter-discourse between ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ metaphysics and between China and “the West”. In his discussion of distributive justice, for example, he writes that “the West has seen the demands that individuals can make on distributive justice, China has seen the obligations of deference individuals have toward others related to them ritually.”³⁸ In another passage, he contrasts “Western approaches” with “the Chinese metaphysical imagination”, the latter representing an interesting twist, for what the nature and status of a “metaphysical imagination” should be is left unclear.³⁹

The emphasis on the adjective ‘Chinese’ in the expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ with many writers serves to establish a counter-discourse, which seeks to articulate an understanding of metaphysics (from some points of view surely a more inclusive understanding) based on writings considered to be ‘Chinese’. Often that understanding is said to include a moral or religious dimension that is lacking in the discourse against which the one of ‘Chinese metaphysics’ is articulated. Mou Zongsan’s notion of “moral metaphysics” (道德的形而上學) is an example of this, consciously set against Kant’s metaphysics of morals (*Metaphysik der Sitten*), which Mou finds deficient. It seems to be the paramount role that both Kant and Mou accord to transcendentalism which makes the latter use the word ‘metaphysics’. Where they differ is that Kant bases his transcendentalism on reason whereas Mou bases his on intuition. Mou Zongsan’s transcendentalism surely is most sophisticated and worthy of studying. But, again, the difference between him and Kant can easily be argued without any reference to the word ‘Chinese’. It is in my view simply unnecessary and even misleading to the point of being counterproductive in its reificationist implications to argue the thesis that the emphasis on intuition is ‘Chinese’ whereas the one on reason is not.

There is indeed a thin line separating writings considered to be ‘Chinese’ because they happen to be written in Chinese from those considered to be ‘Chinese’ because they express something *more deeply* ‘Chinese’. A host of different reasons may motivate argumentations for an

³⁷ Neville, 2003, 320 and 321.

³⁸ Neville, 2003, 319.

³⁹ Neville, 2003, 319.

intuitionist metaphysics that is presented as importantly ‘Chinese’ in that latter sense, involving again different senses of the term. ‘Chinese’ might still simply refer to the Chinese language, but that difference in language might then be argued to be tantamount to a difference in thinking. Such difference in thinking has often sustained arguments about ‘Chinese metaphysics’. Notions such as the ‘Chinese mind’, the ‘Chinese worldview’, the ‘Chinese tradition’, ‘Han thinking’ or ‘Chinese culture’ have been and still are invoked to this end. Yet, these notions stand for far-reaching generalizations and if used must be given careful consideration and argumentation. All too easily they might be expressive of what I call ‘the politics of comparative philosophy’. They establish as useful a difference between ‘Chinese’ and ‘non-Chinese’ which is claimed to be philosophically relevant, but claiming that difference might as much be politically motivated or conducive to political instrumentalization by others.

4. ‘Chinese Metaphysics’ and the Politics of Comparative Philosophy

There surely often is a political side to claiming a philosophical difference between ‘Chinese’ and ‘non-Chinese’ metaphysics. Feng Youlan 冯友兰 (1895–1990) has for instance written that “Western philosophy has *naturally* been dominated by the positive method [of metaphysics], and Chinese philosophy by the negative one.”⁴⁰ Although he allows for some exception to this generalized claim (yet is silent about Confucianism when making his point about a ‘Chinese’ philosophy of silence), he readily characterizes the negative method as following “intuition” (agreeing with Northrop) and as being that of “mysticism”, which is able to reveal “certain aspects of the nature of that something [i.e. the object of metaphysics], namely those aspects that are not susceptible to positive description and analysis.”⁴¹ The passages concerned are in my view not very clear, but that is not my major concern. What I find puzzling rather is that the very characteristic with which ‘Chinese’ and other ‘Asian thought’ has been debased in colonial times as in claims that ‘Chinese thought’ is not quite philosophy but rather religion or mysticism, is here being reconfirmed. Similar arguments abound in contemporary scholarship. Feng and those who write in a similar vein rely on the distinction between rationality and intuition in much the same way as that which has been exposed as a tool of political oppression and imperialism.⁴² Although I cannot argue this case in any satisfying detail here, I would suggest that those scholars who use the

⁴⁰ Feng, 1948, 340–341 (emphasis mine; one wonders what that “naturally” should mean). “The essence of the positive method is to talk about the object of metaphysics which is the subject of its inquiry; the essence of the negative method is not to talk about it.”

⁴¹ Feng, 1948, 340.

⁴² When he claims that “mysticism is not the opposite of clear thinking, nor is it below it”, it rather is “beyond it”, being not “anti-rational” but “super-rational”, he does not and perhaps cannot give any supporting arguments for this point. It remains a claim without argument, the truth or persuasiveness of which perhaps must be intuited. But on that basis, one could always claim the opposite, and intuition would stand against intuition. See: Feng, 1948, 342.

expression ‘Chinese metaphysics’ to establish a counter-discourse of intuition against that of rationality remind themselves that they are drawing on an argument that goes back to Feng Youlan and even much further back to many 19th century comparisons of ‘European’ vs. ‘Chinese thought’ and that the distinction has been fairly thoroughly exposed for its underlying political ramifications by postcolonial scholarship.

The difference between ‘Chinese’ and ‘non-Chinese’ might well encourage arguments in the style of ‘we’ vs. ‘they’ which, if not critically reflected, might be exploited by others for political ends. For one example, it might express the sort of ‘cultural nationalism’ that John Makeham has found underlying much of academic discourse on Confucianism in contemporary China. Makeham has subjected that discourse to a critical reading, particularly “the influential thesis that the core or essence of Chinese culture is *ruxue* [儒學]”, the political dimension of which has been highlighted many times, e.g. very recently by Li Ling 李零 in his reaction to Yu Dan 于丹 and to some New Confucians on the Chinese mainland.⁴³ In Makeham’s view, that thesis expresses not only a culturalism, i.e. the view that “cultural identity ‘trumps’ or is more primordial than political or even ethnic identity” as perhaps best or most influentially articulated by Tu Weiming’s notion of a ‘cultural China’ (文化中國). The thesis rather is advanced in a differently nuanced manner, which includes a connection between culture and nation and thus a straightforward political move. Makeham writes:

Closer analysis of culturalism, however, reveals that the concept does not adequately convey widespread contemporary views about the connection between *ruxue* and Chinese identity, in particular, the ideas that *ruxue* (or *rujia* thought) has blended into the national character of the Chinese people; has created the national character; is the principal component of ‘the Han nation’s cultural-psychological formation’ (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构); is the Chinese people’s national spirit; is the foundation of the Chinese nation’s (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) identity; is the inner soul of the nation; and is the manifestation of the unconscious collective archetype of the Han nation.⁴⁴

Whereas the culturalist posits culture, rather than polity or ethnicity, as the principal source of community identity consciousness or ‘subjectivity,’ the cultural nationalist takes the further step of stipulating that it is the unique culture associated with a particular form of community identity – a nation – that constitutes the basis of that identity.⁴⁵

One influential version of the thesis draws on Li Zehou’s (李澤厚) notion of a “national cultural-psychological formation”, although as concerns Li it should be mentioned that this sort of *ruxue* is in his view so integral to Chinese identity that it needs not much promotion at all.⁴⁶ But others, for instance, Fang Keli 方克立, see the need for such promotion and even speak of “a slogan for ‘united front’ activities”. Makeham quotes Fang:

⁴³ Makeham, 2008, 6. See: Li, 2009/10, 91–103 and Defoort, 2009/10, 4.

⁴⁴ Makeham, 2008, 12.

⁴⁵ Makeham, 2008, 14.

⁴⁶ Makeham, 2008, 15.

China (*Zhongguo* 中國) is not disunited but united because Chinese (*Zhonghua* 中華) culture is united. Viewed historically, the disunity of China's political territory was only ever able to be temporary because the concept of "cultural China" has a long-lasting, even eternal, significance. ... There were many periods in Chinese history when the political territory was disunited, but culturally China has always been united. It is this cultural unity that has been an important element in helping to bring about China's political unity.⁴⁷

This is to show how quickly philosophical arguments are used for political purposes. Although talk about 'Chinese metaphysics' does not exactly correspond with the talk that Makeham examines (for the former may well include much discourse drawing on sources other than *ruxue*), the claims as to the meaningfulness of the qualifying adjective 'Chinese' are very similar.

To conclude, I am not claiming that all talk about 'Chinese metaphysics' is driven by nationalist political aims. But if the use of the term 'Chinese' in the expression is not supplemented with reasons, it might lend itself to or might easily be abused for political purposes. That not all uses need to be driven by nationalist motifs is obvious from the fact that writers such as François Jullien construct similar philosophical arguments, but can hardly be said to pursue a Chinese nationalism (although that does not preclude other political motivations). But this, if anything, supports my main contentions: For the sake of philosophical argument, it is hardly ever necessary to go down the road of 'Chinese' versus 'non-Chinese'. Yet, if that road is taken as it is often taken in talk about 'Chinese metaphysics', then a focus on the political side of things might be worthwhile. Some part of that talk expresses little else than 'the politics of comparative philosophy', a critical discussion of which might eventually be not least in the interest of those who are seriously concerned about the philosophical implications of their arguments, but have no interest in politics whatsoever.

⁴⁷ Fang is quoted by Makeham from his "'Wenhua Zhongguo' gainian xiaoyi '文化中國' 概念小議" of 1993. See: Makeham, 2008, 11.

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